

Iranian, Syrian Officials Meet On Hostages

Associated Press

DAMASCUS, Syria, March 4—A senior Iranian envoy met today with Syria's foreign minister and discussed efforts to free Western hostages held in Lebanon, an informed source said.

The Syrian source, who refused to be identified further, said the meeting between Iranian diplomat Mahmoud Hashemi and Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk Charaa "appears to be to coordinate efforts between the governments of Syria and Iran to gain the release of all the hostages" held by pro-Iranian Shiite Moslem militants in Lebanon.

Syria, Iran's main Arab ally, has been instrumental in helping release Western hostages in the past. It has 40,000 troops deployed in much of Lebanon.

The source said Hashemi, the brother of Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, delivered "a very cordial message" to Charaa from Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, including an invitation for him to visit Tehran to meet with Rafsanjani and Iran's spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

The source said Hashemi arrived here after a visit to Beirut, where he met with senior Shiite Moslem figures on the hostage issue.

"Nobody can be precise about how long the process will take. There appears to be a genuine desire by the Iranian president to end this ordeal. But there are still difficulties," the source said.

Most of the 18 hostages in Lebanon, who include eight Americans, are believed held by Shiite Moslem groups loyal to Iran.

5 Mar 90